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Challenging Knowledge about Social Problems

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Abstract

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Sociology and Social Work Research

Challenging knowledge about social problems

Despite differences – some say substantial, others superficial – in scientific traditions, one of the obvious relations between sociology and social work research can be characterized as a mutual interest in *the social*, and by using sociological theories and methods in the practice of research, both sociology and social work research face the challenge of understanding and explaining the social. This challenge is related to the complex forms and processes of social realities, but also to the ‘reservoir’ of *sociological theories*. Social realities challenge sociological knowledge, and in particular when they appear to us as what we perceive as *unanticipated social phenomena and/or social consequences difficult to explain*. When given a sociological explanation, such phenomena can be termed *social problems*. Following this, another relation between sociology and social work is a mutual interest in *social problems* as a social phenomenon and, in particular, within social work research, as a *practical problem of social action and change*.

The aim of our paper is to outline a potential approach to understanding the intricate relationship between sociology and social work research as *a relation of knowledge constituted by a mutual interest in investigating the social, in approaching social problems as practical problems and thus facing the same challenges in terms of sociological understanding and explanation*. This approach is outlined in two steps. The first is a critical reflection on the book *Understanding the Social – Sociology and Social Work* (Jacobsen & Pringle 2008), as well as the contributions to this book. The book explores the interdependencies between sociology and social work from various perspectives and fields of research. However, we argue that there is a need to focus more specifically on the mutual interest in social problems as a practical problem which requires sociological understanding and explanation. The second is an actual attempt to outline *a sociological approach to social problems as practical problems which requires sociological understanding and explanation*. This is an approach which stresses the liquid, complex, unanticipated and sometimes paradoxical forms of and shaping of social problems. Eventually such an approach will be useful for social work as a sensitive and reflective approach and guide to social problems.